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ABSTRACT

This publication identifies five levels of gang activity in middle and high schools and presents corresponding strategies for dealing with troublesome situations. The five levels of involvement include: (1) no known gang activity; (2) limited gang activity; (3) emerging gang activity; (4) community in crisis; and (5) gang-controlled community. A 10-step intervention plan developed by the San Antonio, Texas, Independent School District Police Department is outlined. Exemplary programs implemented at the San Antonio Independent School District Police Department, Judson Independent School District (Converse, Texas), and Alamo Heights High School (San Antonio) are briefly described. The first program utilizes police officers who are involved with students at every grade level. The second policy prohibits not only gang membership but any gang-related involvement at school, during school-related functions, and on any school district property. The third program utilizes parent meetings and awareness, leadership, mentoring, and community outreach programs. A conclusion is that direct confrontation of gang-involvement issues is the only way to regain the schools and to restore their safety. (LMI)

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# Discouraging Gangs in Schools: A Prescription for Prevention

We have all witnessed the devastation, fear, and damage gang activity can do to the learning environment of our schools.

Students must feel safe in their schools, and they don't. A *USA Weekend* survey in September 1993 revealed that 37 percent of the 65,000 teenagers who participated did not feel safe in their school. Forty-three percent said they avoided school restrooms and other "unsafe" areas. Nationally, 63 percent said they could learn more at school if they felt safer.

The San Diego County Deputy Sheriffs' Association and the National School Safety Center suggest the following components attract young people to gangs:

- Identity or recognition
- Protection
- Fellowship and brotherhood
- Intimidation
- Attention and emotional support
- Money
- Bridge between childhood and maturity
- Provide something to do with leisure time
- Role model
- Direction and clear codes of conduct
- Rituals that provide a sense of stability in a chaotic world
- Sense of belonging
- Link through relative.

## Are Gangs a Part of Student Life?

When educators begin to analyze their students' gang involvement, they should determine not only the presence of gangs, but also the level of involvement.

**Level One: No known gang activity**

Schools must have gang prevention programs in place to reduce the possibility of gang activity. Cocurricular and employment programs can keep students off the streets.

In addition, a strong sense of community and family should be established and nourished.

**Level Two: Limited gang activity**

Sporadic gang-related crimes and graffiti are evident. There is limited gang intrusion into the school, although gang members are seen near the campus.

**Level Three: Emerging gang activity**

One or more gangs exist in the area, and members hang out at schools and parks. Gang-related crimes increase and community pride decreases.

**Level Four: Community in crisis**

Major gang activity includes drive-by shootings. Local parks and schools are dominated by gangs.

Schools see an increase in truancy and dropouts and the community sees an increase in crime. The police begin to be overburdened.





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**Level Five: Gang-controlled community**

Gangs dominate most of the community members' daily lives. The tax base erodes and businesses close. There is a general breakdown of family and community.

How do a school and community deal with these levels of gang activity? The following strategies suggest intervention is critical to the salvation of our schools and communities. Once a school has determined its level of gang activity, the following corresponding levels of intervention may be effective:

**Level One**

- Maintain and implement programs that are a priority
- Reinforce positive attitudes regarding family, home, community, and laws
- Maintain strong business/civic interaction-school interaction

**Level Two**

- Share gang intelligence and program information
- Establish school and community prevention/education programs
- Increase sports and other community activities
- Deter vandalism and graffiti
- Launch anti-gang public information campaigns.

**Level Three**

- Develop and implement target-area strategies
- Develop and implement strategies to suppress gangs
- Mobilize the community
- Establish parent education/accountability programs
- Help students find jobs.

**Level Four**

- Continue major community mobilization efforts
- Establish collaboration between community groups, anti-gang professionals/law enforcement
- Campaign to "Reclaim the Schools, Parks, Kids."

**Level Five**

- Declare a gang "state of emergency"
- Leave the majority of the efforts to professionals
- Establish resident law enforcement patrols.

When educators begin to analyze their students' gang involvement, they should determine not only the presence of gangs, but also the level of involvement.

## A Ten-Step Plan for Intervention

The San Antonio (Tex.) Independent School District Police Department has developed a 10-step plan for gang intervention. These strategies include:

**1. Be honest.** Admit to the potential for problems in your school.

**2. Get smart.** School administrators and staff members must become aware of the myriad of gang symbols and paraphernalia. Gang awareness programs for school staff members, PTA groups, and other community organizations is a positive step in reducing gang involvement.

**3. Identify your school's gang leaders.** Develop a rapport with these students.

**4. Don't close your doors at 3:15 p.m.** To address the needs of marginal students who might be vulnerable to gangs, devise ways to keep students involved after regular school hours with activities that promote school spirit and give them something in which to take pride and participate.

**5. Work with the police.** The police can serve as role models and friends for students who may be at a point where they could be susceptible to the lure of gang activities. Sharing information and concerns is also invaluable.

**6. Give transfer students extra attention.** Students who have been transferred to a school because they were involved in gang-related activities at another school must be steered in the right direction.

**7. Get parents on your side.** Parental support is critical to eliminating gang influence in schools. We need to educate parents so they can recognize the early signs of gang involvement. Parents must support the school's decision to enforce a school dress code to eliminate gang attire from campus.

**8. Find role models for students.** Youngsters need positive role models, someone they can look up to other than drug dealers and other gang members.

**9. Work together.** Fragmented efforts are not enough to combat the gang problem. Police must work with educators, who must work with civic groups, who must work with parents, who must work with students, etc.

**10. Recognize and believe we can make a difference.**

## Exemplary Programs

San Antonio Independent School District Police Department
100 Tuleta St.
San Antonio, Tex. 78212
(210) 736-1387
Contacts: Sgt. Richardo Palomo, Lt. Lew Archer

The SAISD Police Department's goal is to provide students with a safe environment for learning. Members of

the police department are involved in the student's academic and personal life through mentoring, counseling, and teaching. They help students become good citizens and respect others and their property.

The department's 75 officers are involved at every grade level, interacting with as many students as possible through the Intervention Officer Program. The campus-assigned officer is an integral part of the school staff and works on campus to teach students decision-making skills, build self-esteem, and help them resist peer pressure to use drugs and join gangs.

The officers work with students individually, listening to problems, giving directions, and, most important, showing interest and concern for the student as a valued individual.

Officers work with parents by counseling them and their students. They also work with gang members, encouraging them to quit gangs and finding alternatives to gang membership for them.

Community Intervention Officers work with community agencies. Whether students are drug abusers or have been abused in some way, the officers network and coordinate efforts in the community to keep students alive and in school.

## An Emerging Gang Problem

Asian youth gangs are growing at an alarming rate, and they present a special problem for schools and communities. As Melinda T. Cowart and Ronald E. Cowart explain in the December 1993 *NASSP Bulletin:*

"Many teenage youth who have come to America from Southeast Asian refugee camps since 1979 have never experienced a classroom in their lives.... They become increasingly frustrated because they are often unable to measure up to the expectations of family and teachers. Some Asian refugees become disciplinary problems, while others drop out of school before completing a full year.

"(Asian youth gangs) are extremely violent and highly mobile. They wear no 'colors' and are not 'turf' oriented. They blend into the community, where they are more likely to victimize their own people because of fewer language or cultural barriers."

The authors explain that these youth have seen violence for virtually their entire lives, both in their home country and in the United States. To break this cycle and provide them with equal educational opportunities, they recommend that educators address the following:

- **Offer** school orientation programs for parents and students in the native language. Translate written correspondence into the native language as well.
- **Identify,** prevent, and stop acts of racism.
- **Staff** classrooms with culturally sensitive teachers.
- **Incorporate** literature into the curriculum that reflects the Asian-American experience.
- **Recruit** Southeast Asian adults with teaching credentials from their native countries.
- **Involve** Asian refugee youth in cocurricular activities designed to help develop leadership qualities.

The department's Gang Intervention Unit gathers information about which gangs are active, who members are, and what activities are planned. Officers pass information to others in the district, county, and state. This communication network has been invaluable in reducing gang activity.

Judson ISD
9695 Schaefer Rd.
Converse, Tex. 78109
(210) 659-9789
Contact: W. Jay Carey

Judson Independent School District is located in northeastern Bexar County, Tex., with an enrollment of 13,949 students on 15 campuses.

The board of trustees, in an effort to "enhance a safe, secure learning environment and to help foster an attitude of respect for the rights of others," adopted a Zero Tolerance Policy. Judson ISD feels the presence of any gang and gang activities can cause a substantial disruption of the educational process. Therefore, the policy prohibits not only gang membership, but any gang-related involvement and activities at school, during school-related functions, or on any school district property.

The district has identified gang activity and/or involvement as:

1. **Wearing,** possessing, using, distributing, displaying, or selling any clothing, jewelry, emblems, badges, symbols, signs, graffiti, or other items that are evidence of membership in or affiliation with a gang.

2. **Committing** any act or using any speech, either verbal or nonverbal (gestures, handshakes, etc.), showing membership in or affiliation with a gang.

3. **Using** any speech or committing any act to further the interest of any gang or gang activity, including but not limited to:

- Soliciting and/or initiating others for membership in any gang
- Requesting any person to pay for protection or otherwise intimidating or threatening any person
- Committing any illegal act or violation of school district policies
- Inciting other students to act with physical violence upon any other person
- Engaging in concert with others in intimidating, fighting, assaulting, or threatening to assault others.

The district provides counselors and social workers on the campuses to help develop a sense of self-esteem and provide information and guidance for students and staff members. Gang awareness programs are presented at elementary, middle level, and high school levels and to parents and civic groups.

Alamo Heights High School
6900 Broadway
San Antonio, Tex. 78209
(210) 820-8850
Contact: Tom McCloskey

Alamo Heights is located in a suburb within the city limits of San Antonio. Approximately, 1,200 high school students attend the school. A strong school board policy has given the administration an opportunity to address gangs and gang activities.

Schools must have gang prevention programs in place to reduce the possibility of gang activity. Cocurricular and employment programs can keep students off the streets.

New programs have been instituted to develop the educational opportunities afforded all students at the high school. Youth Visions, Southwest Winners, new electives, and leadership training geared to providing options and directional assistance to vulnerable adolescents has helped reduce gang activity at the school.

Parent meetings are held when gang involvement is suspected, and students and parents are held accountable. Awareness programs, leadership, mentoring, community outreach programs, campus unity, and community support have all worked together to find a place for students who have been involved in gangs or who are vulnerable to involvement.

## Challenge for the Future

Gangs do not need to be a part of our school environment. We must work together to make gang involvement a less appealing choice. When schools choose to deny or avoid the situation, they exacerbate the problem.

George Bernard Shaw said, "The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them but to be indifferent to them; that's the essence of inhumanity." Only by directly confronting the issues of gang involvement will we regain our schools, and make schools safe once again.

Written by Linda G. Foster, principal at Alamo Heights High School, and adjunct professor of education at the University of Texas in San Antonio.

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